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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: CUSTOMS AGENTS RELEASED
ON BAIL AFTER COMRADES WAGE 4-HOUR STRIKE

REF: A. ABIDJAN 1088 B. ABIDJAN 1004

¶1. (SBU) In the afternoon of October 3, 2006, three Customs Agents who were arrested in connection with the toxic waste pollution scandal on September 7 (reftel A) were released on bail after a strike, threatened since September 26, commenced on the morning of October 3.

¶2. (SBU) The strike, conducted by nearly 2000 customs agents, lasted a mere four hours before authorities gave in to demands and released the prisoners. On October 2, President Gbagbo conducted talks with the leaders of the four customs unions in the presence of the Junior Minister of Finance, Charles Diby, Acting Customs Director General, Agnes M ,lanhoro (the actual head of Customs, Colonel Major Gnamien Konan, was suspended by PM Banny because of the toxic waste scandal and the intense media circus surrounding the National Assembly's investigation into the matter), and Tax Office Director General, Lambert Feh Kessou. Despite the President's intervention, customs unions officials publicly declared the strike would begin the following day, (although the national TV news broadcast cut off that portion of their statement, leaving the impression that night the strike was settled). On the morning of October 3, customs operations were halted at the port, airport and land borders. Border crossings were open as immigration police were still at work, but the movement of goods was blocked, threatening the 3 billion CFA (\$5.8 million) Cote d'Ivoire takes in daily through customs revenue. By noon, however, strikers called off their action following the government's decision to "provisionally" release on bail the three customs officers.

¶3. (SBU) Background: On September 7, 2006, three customs officers were arrested following the dumping of toxic waste in several districts in the city of Abidjan (reftel B). The customs officers, who work at the Vridi oil depots, supervised the slops-removal operation from the ship &Probo Koala, 8 which containing toxic waste. The customs unions rejected responsibility for the illegal dumping, citing that the request received from the disposal company &Tommy 8 made no reference to the toxicity of the slops. On September 8, 2006, the customs unions waged a three-day strike action at the Vridi oil depots, in protest of the arrest of their colleagues. This strike was called off on September 12, 2006 following mediation by President Gbagbo. Two weeks later, the unions threatened another unlimited strike if their colleagues were not released on bail. On September 26, the customs unions submitted to the customs management a general strike notification starting on October 3, 2006.
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